



Rousseau's Feminist Chains

By BS Murthy

Jean-Jacques Rousseau had set out to determine 'whether there can be a legitimate political authority, since people's interactions he saw at his time seemed to put them in a state far worse than the good one they were at in the state of nature, even though living in isolation'. Consequently, he had formulated *The Social Contract* 'as the best way to establish a political community, in the face of the problems of commercial society', with the immortal opening line, *Man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains*, that is literally true for over two centuries now.

However, the socio-religious circles of individual freedom came to vary from society to society, in times to times; and the objective of this piece is to take a cursory look at the same. In this context, it should be noted that traditionally, societies world over, for the most part, tended to restrain women in chains that are far too shorter than Rousseau's Chains that bound men, and that ensues female freedoms are encapsulated within the realms of male constraints. Nevertheless, for the purpose of this exercise, we may examine the changes in female 'freedom' circles in the Christian, Islamic and the Hindu societies.

Christian Ultra- feminism

The conservative Christian world, like much of the globe, had always been a man's world, though not religiously inimical to women, that is till the early twentieth century, when it was shaken, on the legal ground, by the first wave of feminism, seeking the voting and property rights to underscore the gender equality. But it was Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* that ushered in The Women's Liberation Movement, in the middle of that century, which set the course for enabling women to gain equal rights with men in every human activity and social sphere. However, as the impact of the third feminist wave that ushered in ultra-feminism, which in my view, besides being detrimental to femininity, the charm of womanhood, began to uproot

the family system, the fulcrum of social stability, a debate about it is bound to abound in its fourth wave, as and when it tends.

Muslim Male Chauvinism

“He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her,” those were the words of Jesus Christ (John 8.7) when he was asked by a group of men whether the punishment to a woman accused of adultery should be stoning to death as prescribed by the Mosaic Law (of the Jews).

Given that none of them ventured to harm that woman, the New Testament avers that “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” (John. 3.17).

Whereas Jesus broke the God’s rule thus, in later days, the Jews, His chosen people, having been driven out of their promised land and dispersed all over the Christian lands, had no way to stone their adulteresses to death in the alien lands as commanded by Him.

Maybe it was thus, the Jealous God of the Jews, some six hundred years after His Son’s death, sent Muhammad as His Messenger into their cousins’ land to get tougher than ever with the fair sex; so, much so that His ‘brand new’ religion branded women as an inferior species in ways many, whereby, to cite an example, the witness of four Muslim women equals that of one male Muslim that is besides granting the men of the faith the right to take as many women to cohabit with, that too, on a contractual basis, of course, with an unfettered right to beat, and an inalienable right to divorce them, to name only two.

But as time passed by, the wisdom of some modern Muslim rulers, in countries such as Turkey, Iran, Egypt, and Afghanistan, set aside the God’s Quranic diktats to grant their women-subjects what the rest of the world gave its womenfolk. But sadly, though not surprisingly, given the intensity of the Islamic belief-system and the ghetto-construct of the Musalmans, the gate-keepers of the faith were outraged for the female modernism began to alter Islam’s patriarchal ethos, the fulcrum of its dogma. So, in time, to the hurt of the Muslim women, by uprooting the progressive rulers and undermining the egalitarian measures, they had ensured that the very character of the faith that afforded them primacy in the scheme of all things Islamic was restored. Intended or otherwise, that Islamic regression gave raise to Wahabism, in turn fuelling Islamic extremism the world over, rendering the golden period of Muslim feminism into a transient rainbow lost in the gathering clouds in the God’s own dark skies.

Hindu Swayamvaram

In the Aryavarta of yore, girls were groomed in gurukulas to become satyavadini by the time they turned fifteen, and some of them pursued higher studies to blossom into scholars such as Maitreyi, Ghosa, Gargi, Lopamudra et al.

Even when India was Bharat, still a bride was entitled to choose her man from among her suitors, known in Sanskrit is *swayamvaram*, which only proves that the ancient Hindu men were wise enough to realize that woman’s liberation lay in her right over her body to entrust it to the man she coveted; that is proof enough if it were ever required.

The sum and substance of woman’s life in the Hindu ethos was that she was on an equal footing with that of her male counterpart in the social and religious spheres, which more or less held ground till the eleventh century as captured by Al-Beruni in his Indica.

However, slowly but surely, from that feminist pinnacle, women were insensibly and progressively pushed into the abyss of subservience and worse. Though no historical research is in place that delves into this inexplicable Hindu social degradation, exemplified by female-inimical sati, child marriage, illiteracy to name a few, it can be speculated that so as to spare their fair sex from the glad eyes of the Muslim invaders, the Hindu society would have felt the need to protect its women in ways that proved to be inimical to their well-being in the long run. However, as Islam began to spread its male chauvinistic wings, its corruptive influence on the Hindu male propensities could have exacerbated the feminist interests.

If anything, the evangelic thrust in British India, with its accent on sin and tirade against sex, further dented feminism in the Hindu society that was wont to celebrate female sexuality.

Nevertheless, after India gained its independence, it was only a matter of time before the Hindu society began to yearn for its feminist moorings of yore. But brainwashed by the leftist ideology, by then, it had thrown the Hindu baby with the 'Brahmanical' bathwater, whereby ensuing a cultural vacuum. And ironically the same is increasingly sought to be filled with the Christian ultra feminist setting, which, given the contrasting social moorings and the sexual ethos, has proved to be a square peg in the round hole.

If only Indian women look back into Vedic times, they would be able to gather enough cultural implements to wriggle themselves out of Rousseau's Feminist Chains, once and for all.